

FAIRLIGHT PRESERVATION TRUST

The Summer of 1990 - Thirty years on

As we contemplate the extraordinary nature of our lives here in Fairlight in this very strange summer of 2020 I thought it might be of interest to remind readers of that other rather strange summer of 1990, exactly thirty years ago, when we witnessed the construction of the first sea defence berm in Fairlight Cove below the cliffs adjacent to Sea Road.

Some readers may recall that the campaign to persuade our local authority, Rother District Council, to build sea defences along the base of the cliffs began in 1986. At that time it had become increasingly obvious that the rate of erosion of the Sea Road cliffs was accelerating to an alarming degree. For example, on 18 March 1987 the house, somewhat appropriately called "The Ark", on Sea Road lost 18 metres of its back garden in one night and was left uninhabitable.

The causes of the erosion were many and varied, but evidence showed that as the result of the building in about 1972 of the extensions to the groynes near the harbour in Hastings (near to the net houses where the large car park is now located) the flow of shingle along the shoreline had been interrupted and new shingle was no longer being deposited at the base of our cliffs. The result within about ten years was that the beach below the cliffs had been denuded of its shingle, exposing the base of the cliffs to wave attack and direct erosion by the sea. Unfortunately, there is a layer of weak clay in just that area at the cliff base, so the action of the waves was causing very rapid erosion by undercutting the cliff. Regrettably, the reaction of Rother District Council, our coast protection authority, was not helpful. When the problems were drawn to their attention they adopted what became known as their "Do Nothing Policy", with the intention that nature should simply be allowed to do its worst destroy. Despite the fact that Rother was our coast protection authority one soon gained the impression that the majority of councillors seem to think that dealing with coastal erosion was confined to the problems posed by the sea front at Bexhill. Fairlight and its difficulties were not regarded as being of any importance, notwithstanding the

valiant efforts of the late John Lutman (our District Councillor) and of local residents to raise the issues with them.

However, the estimates from contour maps drawn by engineering experts showed that unless action was taken soon as many as 200 houses in the village could be destroyed within 100 years. The sea would remove all the houses along Sea Road and Cliff Way, and along much of Lower Waites Lane and its surrounding roads within 30 to 50 years. There was also a strong likelihood that it would break through to Stream Lane and beyond, causing flooding in the locality.

The many concerned residents of Fairlight were not prepared to see such a level of destruction to the village and the loss of so many homes. We therefore clubbed together and formed the Fairlight Coastal Preservation Association (“the FCPA”), which was the predecessor of the Fairlight Preservation Trust. There followed a four year struggle to persuade Rother to change its mind and to adopt a more sensible and constructive approach to the problem. Money for coastal defences was available to local authorities but it had to be applied for along with a viable scheme. At the start of the campaign Rother was simply not interested - hence our campaign slogan “Rother doesn’t bother!”

The events of those years would make the subject of another article (or series) but they included a formal petition to the Crown under the Coast Protection Act 1949 for the removal of Rother as the Coast Protection Authority, a visit to meet the Minister of Agriculture (the Ministry of Agriculture being the government department responsible for coastal erosion matters in those days), the sympathetic involvement of the Queen Mother (in her capacity as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports) and her office, threats of legal action and requests for of a public inquiry, a large scale fund-raising campaign in the village and extensive publicity in the press and on television. Eventually, in the Spring of 1990 the Government stepped in and Rother was effectively directed to apply to it for funding to construct the Sea Road berm.

The work on the berm was scheduled to begin in July 1990. We had rejected attempts to design the berm using concrete or indeed utilising the waste from the Channel Tunnel which was then under construction. Either proposal would not

have respected the beauty of the environment in the Cove. Instead, the berm was to be built of huge granite boulders which would be delivered by sea from Norway. The FCPA was given details of the starting date and we awaited with anticipation the arrival of the first barge carrying the granite and the start of the work, which was due to take several months. It was in fact essential that the work be started as soon as possible in order to make use of the summer and early autumn tides and to avoid further destruction by wave action over the next winter. However, the weather in July was less than kind and disaster soon struck. On the day of the expected arrival of the first load of rock the FCPA's secretary, the late George Morris, received a telephone call from Rother saying that the shipment would not be arriving because the barge carrying the load had sunk! In view of all that had happened and the lack of trust that had arisen as the result of Rother's negative attitude, we found this hard to believe. George therefore made contact with Lloyd's List, which publishes details of shipping movements, and it was confirmed that the barge drawn by tugs had sunk a few days earlier in a storm while off the coast of Denmark. This calamity inevitably involved further delay.

However, within a couple of weeks or so the next barge did arrive and was deliberately driven aground on the shore below Sea Road. Laden with huge granite rocks the barge contained a crane for lifting the rocks which were dropped into the sea at high tide. The work of construction then took place in the limited hours of low tide. The only way to get the construction lorries and other equipment to the foreshore at that time was by driving them along the beach from Cliff End, Pett Level. Owing to the shortness of the time period in which to carry out the work the construction often took place at night, using arc lights suspended from the cliff top and lights from the vehicles. The noise created by the work was very considerable and could be heard throughout the village. I well recall visiting the cliff top in the very early hours of a summer morning to see the floodlit scene – only to be joined by several other residents who also could not sleep because of the din! Anyone who has worked or visited the Far East may be used to observing building work taking place in the middle of the night, but it is hardly a common sight in the UK, let alone in Fairlight!

Slowly but surely the berm was constructed. The barges and their tugs landed load after load of rock, which was then carefully put into place. As might have been anticipated there were some unforeseen problems but eventually, by the middle of November, the berm was finished. It had been a long and busy summer for everyone. But there was one further shock in store. The construction company which had been contracted to carry out the project went into receivership a week after the project was completed. Had this happened earlier the job might never have been finished to the correct specification or would have been delayed for another winter and beyond.

Looking back on that extraordinary summer of 1990 we can now see that all the effort made by the village and, in particular, by the members of the FCPA was worthwhile. The berm has been a great asset for Fairlight. It has prevented the loss of a substantial number of homes in the Cove area and the erosion along Sea Road has been held back.

When, quite unexpectedly, the cliffs along Rockmead Road began to collapse as the result of landslip in the early 2000s and several houses were lost there, the Fairlight Preservation Trust was created to fight for a further form of protection in that area. The Rockmead Road berm and wells system was built in 2008. More recently, in 2016, the Sea Road berm and the Rockmead Road berm were joined up by the third stage berm, thereby providing Fairlight with one of the most extensive systems of coastal defence of any community in the UK. Thirty years on we can only marvel at what has been achieved. Moreover, it is pleasing to note that the current Rother District Council is now aware of the coastal erosion problems of Fairlight and is willing to work with us to seek to resolve them.

For further information about the Fairlight Preservation Trust please contact our membership secretary, Jill Lewing, at jill.lewing@btinternet.com. All residents are invited to join and help preserve the village for future generations.

Dr Ruth Kosmin

Secretary